A COMPREHENSIVE TEST BAN TREATY--NOW MORE THAN EVER

The international political arena has changed dramatically in just one year. The Cold War is over, Germany is reunited, Saddam Hussein has annexed Kuwait, the U.S. has poured troops into Saudi Arabia, and the nuclear powers are now seeking mutually-agreed-upon approaches to solving the crisis in the Middle East.

Each new development points more and more clearly to the need for and the timeliness of an international comprehensive test ban (CTB).

The new climate in East/West relations makes cooperative ventures like the CTB more possible than ever before. The Soviet Union's willingness--indeed, eagerness--for a CTB is well-documented: their 18-month moratorium during 1986-87 and their repeated statements that they would join the U.S. in a bilateral test ban at any time. Hundreds of thousands of Kazakhs living downwind of the major Soviet test site at Semipalatinsk have protested the continued testing, forcing the government to close the site. The Soviet government announced it would shift its testing program to Novaya Zemlya, an island in the Artic Circle, and within days, the government of Norway, the people of Novaya Zemlya, and the President of the republic which contains the island--Boris Yeltsin--all lodged protests.

While the growing crisis in the Middle East has diverted attention from the urgent need to halt the nuclear arms race and allocate resources to domestic and environmental problems, it also serves to heighten awareness of the crucial link between the proliferation of nuclear weapons and a CTB. One has only to imagine the effect on stability in the Middle East if Iraq possessed a nuclear bomb.

Americans are deeply afraid, and rightly so, that Iraq will use chemical weapons against U.S. troops. But it is important to remember that poison gas is essentially "the poor nation's atom bomb." Since Israel has acquired a nuclear bomb and prevented Iraq from developing one by conducting an air strike against Iraq's suspected weapons grade materials plant, Iraq has felt it had the right to match the Israelis by obtaining chemical weapons.

Less than two weeks after Iraq pillaged and annexed Kuwait, the 1990 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference convened in Geneva, for the last time before the treaty's renewal in 1995. Angered by the U.S. steadfast refusal to halt nuclear testing--a condition for continuance written into the treaty--the non-aligned nations, led by Mexico, insisted that the final document of the review conference include a commitment by all parties to negotiate a CTB. The U.S. delegation refused. The result: there was no final document from the conference. The future of the NPT is thus clouded by U.S. insistence that it continue to test and develop new nuclear weapons systems. Without an NPT regime, global arms control could be permanently derailed.

The crucial NPT conference coincided with the equally important Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) amendment conference, scheduled for January 1991--the "Test Ban Treaty Conference." This conference has been brought about by extraordinary and unprecedented steps by the non-nuclear nations. The convergence of these two conferences opens a new opportunity for challenging the recalcitrance of the U.S. and other nations opposing a CTB.